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The U.S. Army's European Command deployed an early-warning radar system in Israel last week along with a 120-member support team, the weekly Defense News reported.

The move marks the first permanent presence in Israel of American military personnel. The high-powered radar system is meant to augment Israel's defenses against Iranian ground-to-ground missiles.

According to Defense News, more than a dozen transport aircraft delivered the radar, its ancillary systems, equipment and technicians, as well as maintenance and security specialists to the Nevatim Air Force Base in the Negev. It has not yet been made operational.

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The same system has been deployed for the past two years in Japan against possible missile launches from North Korea. The agreement to provide Israel with the system a few months ago was finalized during the visit by Defense Minister Ehud Barak and Israel Defense Forces Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi in Washington in July.

The new radar will give Israel added minutes to respond to a missile launch, compared with the systems it currently uses. Assisted by data sent from American satellites, the system can detect Iranian missiles shortly after they are launched.

A link with the Arrow missile system makes it possible to launch a defensive missile, and increases the chance of intercepting the incoming missile while giving the home front more time to respond.

The deployment of the radar system may be understood in two contradictory ways. One is that it prevents Israel from taking independent action against Iran, which the United States has made clear in recent months it opposes. The radar system, and Americans stationed here, will restrain Israel, which would be wary about launching an attack that would endanger U.S. personnel.

On the other hand, the deployment of the radar system strengthens Israel's defense against missiles if Israel and/or the United States attacks Iran's nuclear facilities. The defense system could reduce casualties and damage to the home front from a response by Iran and its allies.

This would give decision-makers more freedom to attack Iran's nuclear facilities. Defense officials said they had made arrangements to receive the equipment and personnel in "record time" - two months from the July talks.

In recent weeks, Israeli sources have tried to play down the presence of an American force on Israeli soil and have portrayed it as temporary until operation of the system is transferred to the Israelis.

In any case, information from early-warning satellites, which greatly increases the radar's ability to pinpoint launches, will remain in American hands. The satellite ground station will be in Europe and transmit data to Israel.

The deployment of the radar system in Israel was an initiative by Republican Congressman Mark Kirk of Chicago, who, looking for a way to help Israel, persuaded the governments of both countries to implement the plan.

Israeli defense officials at first objected to the move, citing a possible limitation to the country's freedom of action. But they acquiesced when it was decided that the system would be supported by data from the U.S. early-warning satellite.